

Hour of media shame

KANAK MANI DIXIT

A CASUALTY of the war on Iraq by George W Bush has been the image of Western media as the exemplar of journalistic accomplishment. For decades, journalists worldwide, and the developing world in particular, looked up to the American press with awe (that word!) and respect, as models of probity, independence, courage and investigative zeal. Watergate and all that.

Well, it turns out that they just had not been tested. When the time came for American editors, reporters, studio anchors and producers to stand up to the establishment and the mass expectation of the public, their feet turned to clay. Stout hearts turned to putty.

The 30 March New York Times had this headline in a dateline Washington DC piece by David E Sanger: "As a Quick Victory Grows Less Likely, Doubts Are Quietly Voiced". When American politicians and journalists raise doubts 'quietly', what distinguishes them from their peers all over the world, in countries underdeveloped or overdeveloped?

It started after 11 September 2001, when television, press and radio began to ply the American public with what it wanted to hear about the rest of the world. This was then forced-fed to the rest of the world. In the run-up to Gulf War II, the American press did not question or caution, at one with the weak-kneed congressmen and senators who gave George W Bush a carte blanche to dare and misrepresent his way to war.

Perhaps the worst hour of Western journalism is when it 'embeds' its operatives - hardly reporters - with army columns to report on heroics on the desert road to Baghdad. And displays an unwillingness to present the direct connection between the blazing night sky on television and the death and maiming of civilians on the ground.

The channels prefer not to show images of dead, bleeding, destitute people to save the sentiments of viewers at home. With its power and reach, Western satellite media dehumanising the Arab man, woman and child, which is why we do not feel stabs of pain as heavy ordnance, cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs explode in inhabited cities.

An Iraqi missile harmlessly hitting a Kuwaiti shopping centre gets more airtime than dozens of dead in a Baghdad market. Armoured columns rushing through empty desert are hailed for the speed with which they rush through empty desert. American public relations generals talk down to reporters so submissive that it reminds of 'government press' in tin-pot dictatorships.

It seems time to cast aside the American role models. For they are acting no different than journalists in imperfect democracies when they cover before the vehement (whipped up) beliefs of the public. Fear of being labelled unpatriotic forces them to toe the line, the same way that happens in, say, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Thailand, or Iraq.

As the expose of American media continues to unfold on television screens and downloaded articles, however, no one need feel any sense of superiority.

For it is a tragedy when the tutor is found wanting. No one should presume to claim a moral ground higher than the reporters so thankfully picking up morsels thrown their way by Centcom.

The times call for humility, for everywhere journalists have their insecurities and inadequacies. As we watch television reporters and anchors make a mockery of their craft and careers, picking up morsels thrown their way by the generals of Centcom, the only respectable response is to search within ourselves, and our motives, every time we file a story. With the Western ideal so blatantly exposed, we must now live in a world where we make our own standards and live up to them.

Kanak Mani Dixit, is Editor of Himal, a South Asian magazine published from Kathmandu



Anti-war protests across the world (this one in Sydney) condemn invasion of Iraq.

Death of democracy?

MRIDU THANKI

ALTHOUGH USA has always aggressively pursued its own interest round the world, this is perhaps the first time that in the face of massive opposition (prior to action) states and people from across the planet, that it has attacked another nation on most spurious pretexts. The justifications to invade Iraq started with Saddam allegedly hoarding weapons of mass destruction and as it became evident that the UN Inspectors perhaps would succeed in proving that no such stash existed, USA, with Britain, hell bent on warfare put forward a claim of Saddam being a tyrant, an evil dictator (the argument that he is not the only oppressor in the world falls on deaf ears). Both Bush and Blair declared their intended offensive a moral duty -- an act of magnanimity -- to liberate people of Iraq, bring them freedom and democracy.

Surely even a child could tell them that democracy through bombs and guns is a contradiction in terms. Would it not be true to say that democracy comes about through winning the minds and hearts of the populace? Would it not be right to assume that democratic acts are based on approval by the majority? Yet the war on Iraq is being waged against mighty antipathy from the people round the world (including Americans) and with profound splits and dissent in the UNSC, the EU and the NATO.

It is clear from actions of the USA administration that it intends to dominate the world economically and militarily -- with or without the support of others. It wants to destroy and then to 'make-over' any nation that does not bow down to American political will (a policy document 'Vision for Iraq', already doing the rounds in the US government departments, outlines a blueprint for 'policy, institutional and financial reforms' to be undertaken in post-war Iraq). What is unfolding before us is naked imperialism. This neo-imperialism is being spearheaded by a country founded on violence, plunder and annihilation of indigenous people, and is being aided and abetted by Australia, also founded on violence and genocide, Britain an old colonial power which still lives somewhat uncomfortably with its loss of empire and Spain, the first imperial power in the Americas, which had colonised much of the rest of what Britain did not. The strategy of appropriation of what belongs to others continues (in case of Iraq, its oil) without much moral qualms. (Maybe Bush suffers from a complex -- what his father could not achieve he wants to prove he can. So what is Blair's problem?)

In the previous world domination scenario the western powers declared the people of countries -- even continents -- they went into, as lazy, heathens, uncivilized, less than human etc. and thus justified a takeover or annihilation or slavery or other unreasonable and barbaric exploits. Now the game plan is to create demons/enemies (individuals/states) and then move in to save or free the people from tyrants/communism. The process of demonisation/ dehumanisation

is so subtle and consistent - repetition of certain phrases, focus on one particular person/state, language loaded with morality -- that it manages to convince most of the 'evilness' of the particular person or state. (Why is Saddam evil and not Sharon? In fact why is it that all evil doers happen to be from the non-western countries?)

Iraq of course is not the first state to encounter the wrath of USA. In the last 50 years USA has instigated more military intervention (in over 24 countries) than any other nation in the world -- certainly 22 more than Iraq. And in a number of these there have been repeated incursions. Their crimes: election of government perceived as unfavourable to American politics, robust trade union activities, existence of socialist or communist systems, rich in natural resources. For example, in Chile (September 11, 1971), CIA funded and supported coup overthrew the democratically elected Marxist president and installed a military dictatorship. General strike in Panama was quashed by US troops and marines in 1925. In Vietnam (1960-75) the USA fought the South Vietnam

While the stance taken by France, Germany, Russia and China in this war will be strengthened by the general public support (marches, protests), pressure could also be put on individual governments, through personal letters to our parliamentary representatives, opposing the war, presenting petitions to American Embassies and British High Commissions/Embassies and of course boycotting American products.

ese revolutionaries and North Vietnam to stop the spread of communism in South Vietnam. Over 2 million Vietnamese died in the war. And Iraq has been invaded three times within 12 years (1991, 1998, 2003) for oil.

USA definitely has the might to take over the world. Its stockpile of weapons of mass destruction could obliterate the earth and its people many times over (arms expenditure -- USA 396 billion; Iraq 1.5 billion). At present it has military bases in at least 41 countries -- with multiple stations in most, in Germany, for instance, 27, in Japan 10, in Italy seven in South Korea eight. The whole of Middle East and Central Asia is now well covered by American bases. Of course the Central and South American countries are deemed by as its extended territory -- in the Monroe Doctrine, drawn up in the 19th century USA declared its manifest destiny to look after and control the geo-politics of the western hemisphere and thereby accorded itself the full right to intervene in the internal politics and policies of any country therein any time that America feels threatened.

With this might USA has also taken on the right to impose its will wherever, for whatever and whenever thereby unleashing the law of the jungle -- sanction for 'state terrorism'. It has moved on from its self appointed role of world policeman and set itself up as the judge, the jury and the executioner.

Until now we were more or less in an era of 'sweet economy' i.e. the poor

and developing world having to sell its products, resources and labour at a price determined by the rich countries, the multinationals and other businesses from wealthy nations moving in to countries where labour is cheap and legislation not too restrictive and moving out to another with more favourable conditions, thus the '3rd world' subsiding and sustaining the life style of the rich people and countries. With 'might is right' policy we have entered into the 'blood economy' era in which massacre of people and nations is condoned by the greedy and calculating -- Britain will surely secure contracts, like in Kosovo and Afghanistan, to 'reconstruct' Iraq. Why else would Clair Short, the Secretary of State for International Development make a trip to Washington? (600 million dollar contracts are already on the table). Turkey is to receive 6 billion dollars (it demanded 17 billion) from the USA for the use of its territory -- although they are now playing their own dangerous game in northern Iraq.

Reinforcing these two is the 'permanent arms economy', boosting the wealth of the western nations, the

main arms producers, and strengthening them politically (in 2000 USA sold 18 billion dollars worth of arms to the world -- and often to both sides in conflicts).

So Iraq to day -- who tomorrow? America must have a line up of 'rogue' states and 'demonic' rulers. There is the 'Axis of Evil' to start with. Could it then be the turn of Israel possessing around 200 nuclear weapons, with missiles and warplanes and submarines to launch them from? It has also defied 31 Security Council Resolutions the first dating back to 1968 and the last four passed in 2002. Turkey is another violator of Security Council Resolutions -- at least 21 in the last 32 years.

But it is implicit that the war in Iraq is about oil (it has reserves worth 1.1 trillion) and not bringing about democracy. What does that tell us about American Government and its relationship with oil companies? Much has been already uncovered about Bush Administration's connections with oil and other corporations. Form Bush (stocks in, amongst others, BP, Exxon Mobil, Duke Energy) to Condoleezza Rice (was on the Board of Chevron Corporation) all had or still have major holdings in one or another oil company. The war also exposes how far some governments will now go to protect the corporate interests. As in all wars many will die and fortunes will be made by some.

But the opposition to the war is also phenomenal. There have been con-

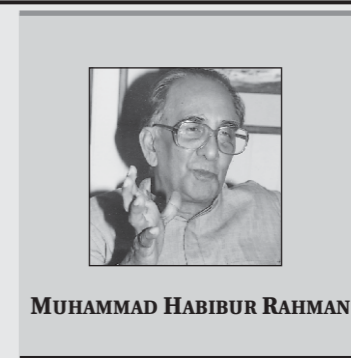
demnations, protests and marches in all corners of the world. People who have never before raised their voice are expressing their resentment on the streets. School children from Bangladesh to the USA have left their class to demonstrate their outrage they feel about this war. Yet there are few words, leave alone action, from one quarter i.e. the Arab world. The leaders seem to be quietly accepting the fate of Iraq perhaps in the belief that they will be spared (oppressive as their regimes are) and possibly they are right. In the region Saddam (with all his treacheries) is the only one not compliant to the American will. Despotic their oil wealth other Arab states appear totally beholden to the USA and therefore unable to protest or mount a challenge.

During the civil war in Spain, in the 1930s, people from all over Europe and America poured in to fight against fascism. The fact is that most Arab states are corrupt, despotic and self-serving, propped up by the American regime and the people afraid to act on their beliefs and convictions. So while bullish foreign powers attack one of their own the Arabs sit by, watch the carnage and guard their own interests. All this to a certain extent also explains why the Palestine situation remains as it is.

In the mean time, while 'state terrorism' is in full force in Iraq, its two architects, Bush and Blair warn us of terrorist threats around us. They echo each other in telling us that the terrorists (including Saddam) "hate us, are jealous of our way of life, our freedom". (Why is it that the western systems, structures, way of life are supposedly more legitimate and better than any other? Maybe one should ask Native Americans or Blacks or the trade unionist in the USA about 'freedom'). In any case, it is not the American or for that matter the British way of life or freedom that is abhorred. What, not just the terrorists or 'fundamentalists' or people in the developing countries, or Muslims but also many Europeans fear, hate, and are seriously concerned about is the interference and intervention in internal politics and policies of nations and continual attempts to impose cultural and economic changes on societies. It is neo imperialism that is reviled and resented. (Is Britain trying to re-launch itself as a colonial power?)

While the stance taken by France, Germany, Russia and China in this war will be strengthened by the general public support (marches, protests), pressure could also be put on individual governments, through personal letters to our parliamentary representatives, opposing the war, presenting petitions to American Embassies and British High Commissions/Embassies and of course boycotting American products. (Globally consumers' refusal to buy South African goods did have a serious impact on the political outcome of the country). It is very important to let the people of Iraq know that they are not alone in their fight.

Mridu Thanki is an independent consultant/ researcher in the fields of social development and education from UK now living in Bangladesh.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

War is peace! War is peace!

In twelve fifty-eight Baghdad fell.
This year will she fall as well?
Genghis Khan founded on earth
The biggest empire,
May be the first unipolar empire.
Before his grandson Halaku Khan
Baghdad trembled
To dust she crumbled
She fell to pieces.
And she was torn to pieces.
In twelve fifty-eight Baghdad fell.
This year will she fall as well?

In the days of chivalry
In the midst of bitterest rivalry
Opponent was allowed to bear his arms.
Halaku, himself a weapon of mass destruction,
Did not ask others to destroy their arms.
He was not interested in a regime change
He did not like to install a puppet in exchange.
In ancient times the brave
Did not rant, rage or rave.
Without using a single word
He could put everything to the sword.
He could call a war just a war
Not a just war
A la mode Saint Augustine.
In modern times brutality is not enough.
Enough is not deceit.
It must be matched with matching conceit.

Will the history of Greece
Or the tales of the Tigris
Help us find out the modern-day Alcibiades?
Modern-day Halaku is a downright hypocrite.
What he says may appear to be Sanskrit.
Kuruskethra is dharmakshetra:
Pro-war is peace-pro.
Battlefield is the place of pilgrimage,
The doves visiting the hawks' carnage.
From the unipolar world,
From the anomalous world,
Antonyms have vanished,
Antonyms have been banished
It a synonymous world.
It is an anomymous world.
It is a unipolar world.
War is peace! War is peace!

True-tongue Yudhishthir says:
Yudhdham sharanam gachchami--
Listen, mon am!
Let us resort to war.
Let us seek refuge in war.
War is peace! War is peace!
Om! Prabhul! Shantil!
Blessed are the war-vigilante
War is peace! War is peace!
In twelve fifty-eight Baghdad fell.
This year will she fall as?

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and Chief Advisor, Caretaker Government.

A letter to America

MARGARET ATWOOD

DEAR America: This is a difficult letter to write, because I'm no longer sure who you are.

Some of you may be having the same trouble. I thought I knew you: We'd become well acquainted over the past 55 years. You were the Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck comic books I read in the late 1940s. You were the radio shows -- Jack Benny, Our Miss Brooks. You were the music I sang and danced to: the Andrews Sisters, Ella Fitzgerald, the Platters, Elvis. You were a ton of fun. You wrote some of my favourite books. You created Huckleberry Finn, and Hawkeye, and Beth and Jo in Little Women, courageous in their different ways. Later, you were my beloved Thoreau, father of environmentalism, witness to individual conscience; and Walt Whitman, singer of the great Republic; and Emily Dickinson, keeper of the private soul. You were Hammett and Chandler, heroic walkers of mean streets; even later, you were the amazing trio, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, who traced the dark labyrinths of your hidden heart. You were Sinclair Lewis and Arthur Miller, who, with their own American idealism, went after the sham in you, because they thought you could do better. You were Marlon Brando in On The Waterfront, you were Humphrey Bogart in Key Largo, you were Lillian Gish in Night of the Hunter. You stood up for freedom, honesty and justice; you protected the innocent. I believed most of that. I think you did, too. It seemed true at the time.

You put God on the money, though, even then. You had a way of thinking that the things of Caesar were the same as the things of God: that gave you self-confidence. You have always wanted to be a city upon a hill, a light to all nations, and for a while you were. Give me your tired, your poor, you sang, and for a while you meant it. We've always been close, you and us. History, that old entangler, has twisted us together since the early 17th century. Some of us used to be you; some of us want to be you; some of you used to be us. You are not only our neighbours: In many cases -- mine, for instance -- you are also our blood relations, our colleagues, and our personal friends. But although we've had a ringside seat, we've never understood you completely, up here north of the 49th parallel.

We're like Romanized Gauls -- look like Romans, dress like Romans, but aren't Romans -- peering over the wall at the real Romans. What are they doing? Why? What are they doing now? Why is the haruspex eyeballing the sheep's liver? Why is the soothsayer wholesaling the Bewares?
Perhaps that's been my difficulty in writing you this letter: I'm not sure I know what's really going on. Anyway, you have a huge posse of experienced entrail-sifters who do nothing but analyze your every vein and lobe. What can I tell you about yourself that you don't already know?

This might be the reason for my hesitation: embarrassment, brought on by a becoming modesty. But it is more likely to be embarrassment of another sort. When my grandmother -- from a New England background -- was confronted with

an unsavoury topic, she would change the subject and gaze out the window. And that is my own inclination: Mind your own business. But I'll take the plunge, because your business is no longer merely your business. To paraphrase Marley's Ghost, who figured it out too late, mankind is your business. And vice versa: When the Jolly Green Giant goes on the rampage, many lesser plants and animals get trampled underfoot. As for us, you're our biggest trading partner: We know perfectly well that if you go down the plug-hole, we're going with you. We have every reason to wish you well. I won't go into the reasons why I think your recent Iraqi adventures have been -- taking the long view -- an ill-advised tactical error. By the time you read this, Baghdad may or may not look like the craters of the Moon, and many more sheep entrails will have been examined. Let's talk, then, not about what you're doing to other people, but about what you're doing to yourselves. You're gutting the Constitution. Already your home can be entered without your knowledge or permission, you can be snatched away and incarcerated without cause, your mail can be spied on, your private records searched. Why isn't this a recipe for widespread business theft, political intimidation, and fraud? I know you've been told all this is for your own safety and protection, but think about it for a minute. Anyway, when did you get so scared? You didn't used to be easily frightened.

You're running up a record level of debt. Keep spending at this rate and pretty soon you won't be able to afford any big military adventures. Either that or you'll go the way of the USSR: lots of tanks, but no air conditioning. That will make folks very cross. They'll be even crosser when they can't take a shower because your short-sighted bulldozing of environmental protections has dirtied most of the water and dried up the rest. Then things will get hot and dirty indeed. You're torching the American economy. How soon before the answer to that will be, not to produce anything yourselves, but to grab stuff other people produce, at gunboat-diplomacy prices? Is the world going to consist of a few megarich King Midases, with the rest being serfs, both inside and outside your country? Will the biggest business sector in the United States be the prison system? Let's hope not. If you proceed much further down the slippery slope, people around the world will stop admiring the good things about you. They'll decide that your city upon the hill is a slum and your democracy is a sham, and therefore you have no business trying to impose your sullied vision on them. They'll think you've abandoned the rule of law. They'll think you've fouled your own nest. The British used to have a myth about King Arthur. He wasn't dead, but sleeping in a cave, it was said; in the country's hour of greatest peril, he would return. You, too, have great spirits of the past you may call upon: men and women of courage, of conscience, of prescience. Summon them now, to stand with you, to inspire you, to defend the best in you. You need them.

Margaret Atwood studied American literature -- among other things -- at Radcliffe and Harvard in the 1960s. She is the author of 10 novels. This piece has also appeared in the Globe and Mail and the Nation last week.